

## Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii*: a new species for Thailand

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On 30 November 1999, as I was walking from my campsite at Yao Wa Chon camp towards the headquarters of the Khao Yai National Park, Thailand, I noticed at some distance in front of me a pipit *Anthus* running alongside the road. As I got closer, it took off and gave a soft *chup* call, which I tentatively recognized as a call typical of Blyth's Pipit *Anthus godlewskii*. The bird landed about 50 m away in tall grass. For the next hour or so I tried to obtain good views of the bird, but it was very shy and I could not get a clear view on the ground; however, I saw it many times in flight and heard its call. It usually gave a call which was similar to the call I heard the first time, and also another call, a slightly buzzing *psheeu*, sometimes both calls were combined. In flight, it looked rather small and short-tailed. On 1 December 1999 I found the bird at the same locality, at first again feeding along the road, and then it stayed in the tall grass, and I still could not get a good view. On 2 December 1999 I finally managed to get good views, and I watched the bird for about 45 minutes, from a distance of 10-15 m, using 10x binoculars and a 25x telescope. As I was familiar with the species, as well as with Richard's Pipit *A. richardi* and Paddyfield Pipit *A. rufulus*, from the Indian subcontinent, Mongolia and China, and had spent some time comparing 'large' pipit species, I identified the bird as a Blyth's Pipit. In the vicinity were two Paddyfield Pipits, which made the comparison between these species easier. On 3 December 1999 I could no longer find the bird, and in the following days other birders could not find it either.

The bird spent most of its time feeding alongside the road and in a dry grassy area, which was part of a large forest clearing surrounded by dipterocarp-dominated evergreen forest, at an elevation of about 800 m.

The Khao Yai bird had some distinctive features that made its identification rather straightforward. The main identification problems were separating Blyth's Pipit from Richard's Pipit, especially the eastern subspecies *A. r. dauricus* and *A. r. sinensis*, and Paddyfield Pipit. Alström (pers. comm.) considers that *dauricus* and *sinensis* are merely variants of *A. r. richardi*. The Tawny Pipit *A. campestris* appears similar in some plumages, but is unlikely to occur in South-East Asia. The following discussion relates to aspects of identification.

### General appearance and jizz

The bird looked rather small and delicate, with a more horizontal stance than Richard's Pipit, a small head and a relatively short tail, recalling 'small' pipits, as described by Bradshaw (1994). Richard's Pipit has a much more upright stance, with longer tarsus and neck, longer tail and more bulky appearance, although *A. r. dauricus* and *A. r. sinensis* are smaller, shorter-tailed and more delicate, and probably overlap Blyth's Pipit in this

respect. The size and general stance of Paddyfield Pipit are rather similar to those of Blyth's Pipit, although the latter seems smaller.

### Upperparts tone and streaking

The bird's upperparts had a rather cold greyish tone, with rather bold streaking on the back, though not very striking. Richard's and Paddyfield Pipits usually have warmer brownish colours, although both species show some variation, and become greyer when plumage is worn. Both species show less distinct streaking on the back.

### Head pattern

The bird showed rather strong streaking on the crown and nape. Bradshaw (1994) described this as a 'capped effect'. The supercilium was short and indistinct, especially behind the eye. The lores were pale. Richard's and Paddyfield Pipits both have less streaking on the crown, and Richard's has a stronger supercilium. Paddyfield Pipit usually has dark lores, while Richard's Pipit has pale lores, as in Blyth's Pipit.

### Underparts

The bird showed little streaking on the breast, and this did not reach the flanks and belly. Richard's Pipit sometimes shows some diffuse streaks on the rear flanks (P. Alström pers. comm.). Paddyfield Pipit can be quite variable, with some birds appearing very streaked while others have a plainer appearance.

### Median coverts

One of the best characteristics for field identification of Blyth's Pipit is the pattern of the adult's median coverts: these show more square-cut and less pointed dark centres, and the margins are paler and narrower along the feather edges than Richard's Pipit. Richard's Pipit shows more triangular and less clear-cut centres, and the margins are buffish and wider. Juvenile patterned coverts are similar in Blyth's and Richard's, but most birds that have undergone a partial post-juvenile moult show one or more adult-patterned coverts, often on the inner coverts. The pattern of the coverts might be difficult to define when the feathers become worn. The Khao Yai bird showed three such typical adult-patterned median covert feathers on each wing, the three inner coverts, enabling me to identify it as a first-winter Blyth's Pipit.

### Feet

Richard's Pipit has an extremely long hind claw (13.9-24.5 mm). Blyth's Pipit has a much shorter hind claw (9.9-13.4 mm; Beaman and Madge, 1998). This characteristic feature was easily visible during good views at Khao Yai, when the bird was walking on the road.

**Bill**

Compared to Richard's Pipit, Blyth's Pipit has a shorter and more pointed bill; Bradshaw (1994) described it as 'conical shaped'. This was a distinctive feature of the Khao Yai bird.

**Voice**

The bird gave both typical calls – a soft and quiet *chup*, and a slightly rasping and longer *psheeu*, slightly descending towards the end. The calls were sometimes given together or repeated. Cramp *et al.* (1988) describe another alarm call, a dry *dzeep* with an anxious tone, recalling Yellow Wagtail *Motacilla flava*. Richard's Pipit gives a distinctive call that is often described as explosive and Sparrow-like *chip*, *tchut* or *schreep*, and rarely another soft *chip* call, recalling that of Blyth's Pipit, but always together with the typical explosive call. Paddyfield Pipit gives an explosive but relatively subdued *chip*, *chup* or *chvrist* call (Robson 2000).

This constitutes the first record for Thailand. Blyth's Pipit breeds from Southern Transbaikalia and Eastern Manchuria south to Tibet; it winters mainly in the Indian subcontinent, and is an uncommon winter visitor to

Myanmar. It is a rare vagrant to Europe and the Middle East (Cramp *et al.* 1988, Robson 2000). It was predicted by Boonsong Lekagul and Round (1991) as a potential visitor to Thailand.

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## Notes on the Talaud Rail *Gymnocrex talaudensis* from Karakelang island, North Sulawesi, Indonesia

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The Talaud Rail *Gymnocrex talaudensis* is a little-known species presently recorded only from the island of Karakelang in the Talaud Islands, North Sulawesi, Indonesia. The species was described from the single type specimen collected in 1996 (Lambert 1998). This specimen had lost its tail and was in heavy wing moult, retaining only a few fully grown flight feathers. In addition to the holotype, *G. talaudensis* is known only from two brief sightings made in 1996 by F. Lambert and F. Verbelen (Lambert 1998). Consequently, biometric data and plumage descriptions for Talaud Rail are incomplete and the species's status is little-known.

On 22 May 2000, I discovered a recently captured *G. talaudensis* being kept in a house in the village of Rae (04°19'N 126°45'E), Beo sub-district, Karakelang. The rail had reportedly been caught in a snare in marshy grassland some 2-3 km inland from the coastal village. The bird, which was in good condition with complete rectrices and remiges, was purchased from the owner for a small sum and then measured, described and photographed before being released back to the wild. The wing and tail measurements of this individual represent the first such measurements for this species.

During fieldwork on the islands in early 1999, many Karakelang villagers were found to be familiar with *G. talaudensis* and a number of anecdotal reports shed some light on the distribution and status of the species on the Talaud islands.

**DESCRIPTION**

The individual of *G. talaudensis* obtained in the village of Rae on 22 May 2000 was considered to be an adult, based on plumage and bare part colouration, although it was not sexed. The bird was reported to have been in captivity for less than 24 hours and was in a good condition, with complete plumage. The following description was taken under natural light:

Basal two-thirds of the bill yellow, brightest at the base of the upper mandible and with dark markings around the nares. Distal third of the bill a dirty horn, the bill tip off-white. Legs dull pink with the front and back of the tarsii a dull yellow. Iris scarlet red, surrounded by a fleshy cerise pink eye-ring. A large bare skin patch extended behind the eye and was pink with two